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GOETHE'S "GEHEIMNISSE"

The very title of the poetic fragment which is the subject of my discussion invites interpretation and comment. For it is not by mere chance that Goethe chose it. Consciously he loves and revels in the secret, the mysterious, the poetic and philosophic value of which he fully realizes. A few passages from his works and letters may illustrate this. In the famous entry to his diary of August 7, 1779, in which he casts a retrospective look on his past life, its shortcomings and achievements, he tells us: *Wie ich besonders in Geheimnissen, dunklen imaginativen Verhältnissen eine Wollust gefunden habe.* And this confession is corroborated by a letter of 1774 in which he exclaims: *in mysterio voluptas.* Later during the time of his intimate friendship with Schiller, who did not share this delight in the mysterious in the same degree, Goethe seems to have felt his fondness for it as one of the faults of his nature. Replying to Schiller's criticism of certain portions of *Wilhelm Meister* in which Goethe had indulged rather freely in the use of the miraculous, he writes to Schiller: *Ich bitte Sie, nicht abzulassen um, ich möchte wol sagen, mich aus meinen eigenen Grenzen hinauszutreiben. Der, Fehler, den Sie mit Recht bemerken, kommt aus meiner innersten Natur, aus einem gewissen realistischen Tic, durch den ich meine Existenz, meine Handlungen, meine Schriften den Menschen aus den Augen zu Rücken behaglich finde. So werde ich immer gerne incognito reisen, das geringere Kleid vor dem besseren wählen. . . .* At the same time he knows that it is one of the great prerogatives, if not the mission of the true poet to reveal secrets:

Was der Himmel nur Herrliches hat, was glücklich die Erde
Reizendes immer gebar, das erscheint dem wachenden Träumer.
Alles erzählt er den Musen, und dass die Götter nicht zürnen,
Lehren die Musen ihn gleich bescheiden *Geheimnisse* plaudern.

Secret and mystery, however, are indispensable and important not only to the poet, their interpreter, but also to humanity in general. In a remarkable essay, entitled "*Geistesepochen*" in which Goethe describes the development of the human mind as the result of reason and understanding, *Vernunft und Verstand*, the two essential historical forces, the alternating rule of which creates the various epochs of human history, he points out how

critical understanding (Verstand) gradually undermines and destroys the mysterious, especially in the sphere of religious belief. A general dissolution is the result toward which Goethe believed his own time and the future were inevitably drifting. "Und so wird denn," he closes the essay, "auch der Wert eines jeden *Geheimnisses* zerstört, der Volksglaube selbst entweiht; Eigenschaften die sich vorher naturgemäss aus einander entwickelten, arbeiten wie streitende Elemente gegen einander, und so ist das Tohu wa Bohu wieder da, aber nicht das erste, befruchtende gebärende, sondern ein absterbendes, in Verwesung übergehendes, aus dem der Geist Gottes kaum selber eine ihm würdige Welt abermals erschaffen könnte."

I have attempted here to sketch Goethe's attitude to what he calls the secret, not only for the purpose of explaining the title of the fragment but also of showing how he could have been attracted by the subject which this title was to indicate and on which, contrary to his custom, he was prevailed upon to shed some light in a special essay or note of the year 1816. A literary society of students, perhaps the one at Berlin of which Tieck was a member, had discussed the poem and, failing to come to an agreement with regard to its meaning, had asked Goethe to help them solve the riddle.

According to Goethe's essay his plan was to take the reader to a sort of ideal Montserrat where twelve knights living as monks and forming a secret order which represented various climes and nationalities, had gathered for the purpose of worshipping God in quietude, each one according to his own manner. The reader or hearer, Goethe tells us, would have been made aware that these monastic knights whom the desire for the highest culture and perfection had brought together, were distinguished representatives of the various modes of thought and sentiment which climate, country, nationality, necessity and custom had developed in man or stamped upon him.

The center of this mysterious order or community is a man called *Humanus* who has attained the position as head because every member had felt a certain resemblance with and attraction to him. So great has been the influence of *Humanus* that his spirit is now embodied in every one of the members and he is ready to leave them. Before he departs, however, he tells the members

the history of his inner development, and again the members, who have come in contact with him during the course of time, in turn also relate parts of the life of this extraordinary man.

During this farewell colloquy, the fact would have developed that every religion in the course of its history attained a moment of blossom and fruit (*Blüte und Frucht*) which showed it in perfect harmony with the true spirit of *Humanus*.

The sympathetic hearer, having thus been led through all countries and epochs, and having thus learned of all the gladdening results produced by divine love and human charity, would have been dismissed with the most happy feeling. For nothing would have appeared in the accounts of *Humanus* and the members, of the dissensions, the abuses and the disfigurements which have made every religion hated during some period of its history. Goethe concludes: "As the whole action was to have taken place during holy week and as the chief symbol of the secret society is a cross surrounded by roses, it will easily be seen that the permanence of elevated human conditions which found their confirmation on Easterday would have revealed itself also in the parting of *Humanus*." So much for Goethe's plan. It may be added that the place of the departing *Humanus* was to have been taken by brother *Marcus*, an humble, devoted and faithful youth, in which character Goethe, without doubt, had intended to picture himself.

If Goethe had succeeded in carrying out his plan, the poem would have become one of the most remarkable literary documents of the period of enlightenment, the poetic expression and representation of its most glorious idea: the regeneration and ultimate union of humanity and christianity, an idea which inspired the best thoughts and efforts of Klopstock and Wieland, and, above all, was the central thought in Herder's life work. To him culture and religion were the two great historical forces upon the fusion and harmonious coöperation of which the future progress of humanity depended. From this point of view, he had conceived the idea of a general ethnography, his object being to gain an insight into the very nature of man as revealed in the course of the latter's historical development in every part of the globe. The results thus obtained were to serve what Herder considered his mission: the rejuvenation and regeneration of the human race.

In the light of these remarks it can easily be seen how Goethe's

"Geheimnisse," if completed, would have become the poetic "flower and fruit" of Herder's *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, the very work that had matured during the years of his most intimate friendship and intercourse with Goethe. And as there can be no doubt that *Humanus*, the head of the mysterious community in the *Geheimnisse*, was no other than Herder, one of the secrets of the poem would have been the glorification of this extraordinary man, his example and his teachings.

We should misunderstand, however, the ultimate purpose of the poet were we to believe that the secret order of monastic knights was to have represented only the historical development of culture and religion. Goethe in his sketch of the plan describes the purpose of the life of the community as the development of the highest culture and perfection in the individual members, and we are told further that the departure of *Humanus* was to have revealed the permanent character of the lofty human ideal for which these men had been striving.

This future state of a higher and more perfect life which hovered before Goethe's vision as the final goal of culture and religion seems to reëcho the jubilant exclamation of Lessing: "Sie wird gewiss kommen, die Zeit eines neuen ewigen Evangeliums."

As early as the 13th century we meet with the prophesy of a coming third era—the era of a new and eternal gospel. According to Joachimus, abbot of the cloister of Flora in Calabria, who died in 1202, the age was to be the era of the Holy Spirit, following the era of the Father and the era of the son of God. Foreshadowing the distant Reformation of the Church, so ardently desired in the circles of the early mystics, the hope for the coming of the era of the eternal evangel was, for centuries, the secret consolation of many a pious soul in the midst of ecclesiastical corruption.

Nor did this hope cease to comfort men of deep religious conviction even after the Reformation of the Church had been realized. It is a remarkable fact, usually disregarded or underestimated by current church histories, that toward the close of the 16th and at the beginning of the 17th centuries the widely spread feeling is found in Germany that the Reformation had failed. The desperate political situation, the general decline of literature, art, and science, the growing social corruption, and the endless quarrels among Lutheran and Reformed theologians caused many serious

patriots to inquire whether the protestant Church had remained true to the ideals of the great Reformers. The answer to this question was a negative one, and it is in this general feeling of disappointment and discouragement that we must look for the causes of the origin of numerous sects and separatist movements during this period. It is in the same feeling also that the remarkable movement of the Rosicrucians had its origin: the attempt to bring about a general reform of the deplorable conditions in Church, society and politics by a secret order or society, comprising the likeminded protestants of all nations, chiefly those of Germany.

It is impossible here to discuss in detail the history of this movement which caused a great commotion throughout Europe. It had its beginning in the famous pamphlet *Fama Fraternitatis Roseae Crucis* by Johann Valentin Andreae, one of the most enlightened and remarkable men of the seventeenth century. In this pamphlet which in form is a sort of "Novelle," are contained the chief ideas of the movement which here concern us most.

The secret order of the Rosicrucians who have for their emblem a cross surrounded by roses, was founded, as we are told in this book, by Christian Rosenkreuz, a German nobleman who, on his extended journeys through Europe and the orient had found for himself a religious belief which in a wonderful way seemed to be the religion of all centuries. The belief and philosophy of the new secret brotherhood is not in opposition to theology "sondern worinnen es Plato, Aristoteles, Pythagoras und andere getroffen, wo Enoch, Abraham, Moses, Salamon den ausschlag geben und womit die Bibel übereinstimmt, das kommt zusammen und wird eine sphaera oder globus, dessen omnes partes gleichweit vom centro stehen."¹

The members of the secret order have nothing to do with alchemy. They are convinced that they are fighting for the cause of education and enlightenment although they know that, for a time at least, they must keep their secrets to themselves. But the hour will come when that, which must be kept secret for the time being, will be proclaimed freely and openly before the world. In beautiful and poetic words the secret which the future will reveal is indicated in the following passage from the *Confessio Fraternitatis*:

¹ *Fama Fraternitatis*, Oder Entdeckung der Brüderschaft des löblichen Orders des Rosencreutzes, Cassel 1616, p. 32.

"Warumb wollen wir nicht in *der einigen Wahrheit*, (welche die Menschen durch so viele Irrwege und krumme Strassen suchen), hertzlich gerne ruhen und bleiben, wenn es Gott gefallen hette, das sechste Candelabrum nur uns alleine anzünden oder leuchten zu lassen? Were es nicht gut, dass man sich weder vor Hunger noch Armut, weder vor Krankheit noch Alter zu besorgen und zu befahren hette? Were es nicht ein köstlich Ding, dass du könntest alle Stunde also leben, als wenn du von Anfang der Welt bisher gelebt hettest und noch ferner bis ans Ende derselben leben soltest? Were es nicht herrlich, dass du an einem Orte also wohnen könntest, dass weder die Völker, die über dem Fluss Ganges in India wohnen, ihre Sachen für dir verbergen, noch die, so in Peru leben, ihre Ratschläge dir verhalten könnten."²

It is a kingdom in which peace, truth and tolerance will rule supreme, that hovers before the eyes of Andreae, the vision of the golden age of the everlasting gospel; or, as a contemporary writer expresses it in Latin: *Illa reformatio mundi in tribus potissimum rebus cernetur; prima erit in ejectione impiorum . . . secunda in rerum omnium affluentia et copia. Tertia in bonis animi virtutibus omnibus et scientia exaggerati ut juste sobrie, pie et in pace vivatur, quem ad modum ab initio fieri debuit, si Adamus astutia diaboli in peccatum non incidisset. Hoc enim est illud, quod precari jubemur, ut veniat regnum Dei, ut fiat voluntas ipsius sicut in coelo sic et in terra, hic est Sabbatus ille, qui populo Dei expectandus relinquitur.*"

In a letter written to her husband during his Italian journey, Caroline Herder reports that Goethe had recited "das Gedicht von den Roesencreutzern."³ This seems to indicate that in Herder's most immediate circle there existed no doubt concerning the meaning and origin of the poem. But strangely enough the commentators have thus far paid almost no attention to this passage, nor to the fact that the symbol of the cross surrounded by roses would itself suggest some connection with the Rosicrucians.

What inspired Goethe were not, to be sure, the later alchemistic and other phantastic theories ascribed to this supposed secret order, but the lofty and prophetic ideas of Andreae, in essential ways a forerunner of Herder, for he had anticipated some of Her-

² *Fama Fraternitatis*, p. 45 ff.

³ *Herders Reise nach Italien*, p. 74

der's greatest ideas: the fusion of Christianity and humanity, the conception of a general ethnography and the vision of a golden age of human culture.

That Goethe became acquainted with the Rosicrucian movement through the study of G. Arnold's *Kirchen und Ketzergeschichte* there can be no question. Nor can there be any doubt that his interest in this movement and the man who started it was greatly increased by Herder who revived the memory of Andreae at about the same time that Goethe was at work on the *Geheimnisse*. And it is more than probable that during this time of their most intimate and cordial intercourse Goethe may have been directed by Herder to the study of the book which the latter, in his famous essays on the origin of freemasonry, published in the *Teutsche Merkur* of 1782, had shown to have been written by Joh. Val. Andreae, who, as the founder of several secret societies of the seventeenth century,⁴ was considered by the German freemasons as one of the earliest and greatest champions of their ideals. In 1780 Goethe had become a member of the order of freemasons to which Herder had belonged since the year 1766. It is significant that Goethe, in a letter to Frau von Stein of June 24, 1782 calls the Weimar lodge to which he belonged, "Die Geheimnisse." I have found, moreover, that the lodge of freemasons, founded 1783 in Warsaw, was called *Académie des Secrets*, a name that was evidently patterned after the *Academia dei secreti* at Naples. It is quite probable that this was known to Goethe, and the title of our poem may, therefore, have the double meaning of secrets which the poet is to disclose in the poem, and of the name of the fraternity or order which is the guardian of these secrets.

Whichever of these two meanings we may prefer, I am of the opinion that the first suggestion not only of the general idea of the *Geheimnisse*, but also many of the details of the plan of the poem came to Goethe through the plot of Andreae's *Fama fraternitatis Rosaecrucis* which runs as follows:

A young German nobleman and member of a monastic order, who, on his journey to the holy land, has come in contact with Arabian and African scholars and during his intimate intercourse with them has become convinced that the essence of true religion is the same among all men of all periods and all parts of the earth,

⁴ Felix E. Held, *Christianopolis*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1916.

conceives the idea of a general reformation of the world by the new message which has gradually dawned upon him. Finding, however, that it is received with ridicule by the scholars of the various nations of Europe whom he approaches, he returns to Germany with the intention there to found a society for the propagation of his ideas. This fraternity is composed of eight members chosen from his former monastery. They live together in a new building erected for this purpose which is called *Sancti Spiritus*. Having been instructed in the wisdom of their superior, they finally depart to various countries in order to spread the new message. Once a year, on Good Friday, they are to return to *Sancti Spiritus* in order to relate their experiences and observations. Allda "muss es freilich lieblich gewesen sein, alle Wunder so Gott in der Welt hin und wider angestreuet, wahrhaftiglich und ohne Gedicht [ohne Zudichtung] zu erzählen anzuhören. Soll auch menniglich vor gewiss halten dass solche Personen, die von Gott und der himmlischen Machina zusammen gerichtet und von den weisesten Männern so in etlichen seculis gelebt, ausgelesen worden, in höchster Einigkeit, grösster Verschwiegenheit und möglichster Gutthätigkeit unter sich selbst und unter andern gelebt haben."⁵

The founder of the society died in the 106th year of his life, whither he had gone the members did not know until 120 years later when they discovered a secret door in the monastery leading to an artificially lighted vault, in the middle of which stood an altar with the inscription, A. C. R. C. universi compendium vivus mihi sepulchrum feci. Jesus mihi omnia. Nequaquam vacuum legis jugum. Libertas Evangelii. Dei gloria intacta. Under the altar was found the body of the founder absolutely preserved as if he were alive, holding in his hand a little book which contained his final message to the world. It is with this message that the brotherhood from now on comes before the public.⁶

The similarity of this story with the essential features of the plan of Goethe's poem seems to me apparent. In both cases we have a sacred brotherhood of monastic knights gathered around a leader or head who is to deliver a new religious message to the world. In both instances the members of the brotherhood assemble on Good Friday to relate their experiences, which in the case of Goethe's

⁵ *Fama Fraternitatis*, p. 16 ff.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22 ff.

knights seem almost the same as those of the first Rosicrucians:

"Wenn nun. . . der Hörer, der Theilnehmer, durch alle Länder und Zeiten im Geiste geführt, überall das Erfreulichste, was die Liebe Gottes und der Menschen unter so mancherlei Gestalten hervorbringt, erfahren; so sollte daraus die angenehmste Empfindung entspringen indem weder Abweichung, Missbrauch noch Einstellung, wodurch jede Religion in gewissen Epochen verhasst wird, zur Erscheinung gekommen wäre." Finally there seems to me a similarity in the fact that the full message becomes public only with the departure of the leader.

For the understanding of Goethe's poem it is most important to notice the changes which he made in the material of the plot which he found in the *Fama*. I have already pointed out that *Humanus*, the leader of Goethe's brotherhood, is no other than Herder, the teacher and master whom he had hailed as Christ in his early letters. There is no question in my mind that Goethe has this brotherhood consist of twelve members because of the twelve apostles of the founder of Christianity. Herder, the bearer of the new everlasting gospel of the union of religion and humanity, represented by the symbol of the cross surrounded with roses, and Goethe, the modest, meek apostle of the gospel. I cannot think of a more glorious tribute to this great teacher and master. Nor can I imagine a message more timely and appealing at this time of general world strife than the vision of a new era of humanity contained in the original plan of Goethe's *Geheimnisse*, and in the lines which describe the hero of Goethe's poem as he first beholds the sacred symbol:

Schon sieht er dicht sich vor dem stillen Orte,
Der seinen Geist mit Ruh und Hoffnung füllt,
Und auf dem Bogen der geschlossnen Pforte
Erblickt er ein geheimnisvolles Bild.
Er steht und sinnt und lispelt leise Worte
Der Andacht, die in seinem Herzen quillt,
Er steht und sinnt, was hat das zu bedeuten?
Die Sonne sinkt und es verklingt das Läuten!

Das Zeichen sieht er prächtig aufgerichtet,
Das aller Welt zu Trost und Hoffnung steht,
Zu dem viel tausend Geister sich verpflichtet,
Zu dem viel tausend Herzen warm gefleht,
Das die Gewalt des bittern Tod's vernichtet,
Das in so mancher Siegesfahne weht:
Ein Labequell durchdringt die matten Glieder,
Er sieht das Kreuz, und schlägt die Augen nieder.

Er fühlet neu, was dort für Heil entsprungen,
Den Glauben fühlt er einer halben Welt;
Doch von ganz neuem Sinn wird er durchdrungen,
Wie sich das Bild ihm hier vor Augen stellt:
Er sieht das Kreuz mit Rosen dicht umschlungen.
Wer hat dem Kreuze Rosen zugesellt?
Es schwillt der Kranz, um recht von allen Seiten
Das schroffe Holz mit Weichheit zu bekleiden.

Und leichte Silber- Himmelswolken schweben,
Mit Kreuz und Rosen sich empor zu schwingen,
Und aus der Mitte quillt ein heilig Leben
Dreifacher Strahlen, die aus Einem Punkte dringen;
Von keinen Worten ist das Bild umgeben,
Die dem Geheimniss Sinn und Klarheit bringen.
Im Dämmerchein, der immer tiefer grauet,
Steht er und sinnt und fühlet sich erbauet.

JULIUS GOEBEL.